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ABSTRACT

This study focused on participative decision making which is considered an important way of developing subordinates in mentoring relationships. Subjects were managers (N=73) from diverse organizations. Scores were obtained for overall participation and decision quality. Further, it was determined how different aspects of the situation interacted with the protege variable and which rules were violated when dealing with proteges verus non-proteges. The second study investigated how personal mentoring history affects decision making style using the same group of managers, 44 of whom responded. Using a modified version of the Vroom-Yetton cases, results showed that participation in decision making was not always a developmental tool and more importantly, participation did not ensure quality decisions. Managers who had been mentored varied their participation more between proteges and non-proteges than did other managers. They did not, however, make better decisions than other managers. Practical points to make the most of mentoring include remembering it is when one particpates, not that one participates that is important; being careful not to overprotect proteges; and being sensitive to non-proteges. (ABL)

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MAKING THE MOST OF MENTORING

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ABSTRACT

Our study focused on participative decision making which is considered an important way of developing subordinates in mentoring relationships. Using a modified version of the Vroom-Yetton cases (1974), we found that participation is not always a developmental tool and more importantly, participation does not ensure quality decisions. Managers who had been mentored varied their participation more between proteges and non-proteges than did other managers. They did not, however, make better decisions than other managers. We suggest some pitfalls inherent in the mentoring process.

FIRST STUDY

Participative decision making is widely viewed as an effective way of developing subordinates. Vroom and Yetton's (1973) model provides a measure of managerial participation. This model is normative as well as descriptive, guiding the decision maker to a set of feasible solutions based on a number of problem attributes and normative rules. Thus agreement with the feasible set is a measure of the decision quality. Also, we can see what errors managers make with proteges versus non-proteges. We used a modified version of the Vroom-Yetton individual problem set (1974) to determine the types of situations in which managers allow subordinates to participate in decision making (Horgan and Simeon, 1986).

Subjects were 73 managers (57 males, 16 females) from diverse organizations. They averaged 41.7 years old, managed an average of 9.6 subordinates, and had been with their organization an average of 10.8 years. We obtained scores for overall participation and decision quality. Further, we determined how different aspects of the situation interacted with the protege variable and which rules were violated when dealing with proteges versus non-proteges.

Group results showed that when managers work with proteges, they are no more participative nor do they make better decisions than when they work with non-proteges. There were, however, differences in the types of problems on which proteges and non-proteges are allowed to participate. In general, proteges participate across the board on all kinds of problems, while non-proteges are allowed to participate only on the safe, easy problems. Since the group data masked some important individual differences, we looked at three groups of subjects: (1) those who were better decision makers with proteges (as measured by agreement with the feasible set), (2) those who were better decision makers with non-proteges, and (3) those who were equally good with both groups. .

Managers who were better decision makers with proteges (44%). Overall, this group was somewhat less participative than the other groups, but they were equally participative with proteges and non-proteges. Thus, the better decisions they made with proteges did not result from participation. The errors they made with their non-proteges were in situations where they were unlikely to sell their own solution and subordinate acceptance was critical. In other words, they were somewhat insensitive to their non-proteges' needs. This group, who in terms of quality of decision making with proteges, was doing the best job of mentoring, seemed to be

especially sensitive to their protege's need to accept decisions and did not take acceptance for granted.

Managers who were better decision makers with non-proteges. (33%) This group was more participative with non-proteges. With proteges, they erred by being too autocratic when lacking sufficient information on important problems with no clear cut solutions. They also erred on problems in which they were unlikely to sell their own solution, apparently assuming their protege would agree. The relationship may get in the way: they overlook the need for acceptance by proteges and protect proteges. They are less participative with proteges, perhaps because of their attempts to protect proteges from mistakes.

Managers who were equally good decision makers with both groups. (23%) This group made technically good decisions, but erred by not taking into account the importance of decision acceptance by subordinates.

Clearly, the blanket assumption that participative decision-making develops subordinates is overly simplistic. Those who did make better decisions with their proteges were no more participative with them. Participation alone may not be a very effective tool to develop decision making skills. The keys to effective decision-making with proteges seem to be (1) encouraging participation in all kinds of situations and (2) being sensitive to the protege's needs to accept the mentor's decision when decision making is not shared.

SECOND STUDY

The second study investigated how personal mentoring history affects decision making style. We asked the same group of managers about their experiences as mentors and/or proteges, expecting that those experiences would influence interactions with subordinates. For example, ex-proteges might be better mentors.

We included measures of perceived job satisfaction and career success (Burke, 1984; Riley & Wrench, 1985; Roche, 1979) and measures of the positive and negative influences of mentors on personal and career development (Kram 1983,1985; and Levinson 1978). Forty-four questionnaires (28 male, 10 female, 6 unidentified) were returned (60%). Respondents did not differ statistically from non-respondents on sex, age, number of subordinates, or years with the organization. Respondents were divided into two groups, those who had had a mentor (n=25) and those who had not (n=19). These two groups did not differ statistically on age, number of subordinates, or years with the organization.

Respondents reported having from one to five mentors, with one mentor being the most frequent. Ten of the 25 subjects with mentors (40%) reported that the relationship was currently taking place while the remaining 15 (60%) reported the relationship had been terminated. The length of the mentoring relationships ranged from six months to fifteen years with an average of 6.2 years .

Respondents who have had mentoring relationships tended to display a larger difference in participation scores between protege and non-protege scenarios ($\bar{X}=.36$) than did respondents who reported not having a mentoring relationship ($\bar{X}=-.30$, $t(35)=1.38$, $p<.10$). This suggests that mentored mangers set up situations differently for proteges versus non-proteges. Managers who have not had mentors seem to treat their subordinates more similarly and perhaps, more fairly.

Involvement in a mentoring relationship did not produce better decision makers in either protege or non-protege situations. However, there were different styles of decision making for respondents with and without mentors. We will look at two kinds

of differences: (1) aspects of the situation that account for the most variation in participation scores, and (2) rule violations.

Managers with Mentors: How they deal with proteges.

Aspects of the situation that account for when participation varies. With proteges, this group varies their participation most depending on the adequacy of information they (the mentor) possess and on the certainty of subordinate acceptance. These two attributes are important for good quality decisions and subordinate acceptance of the decisions. Managers with mentors have apparently learned which aspects of the situation are important in determining when to delegate.

Rule violations. With proteges, these managers err more on decisions dealing with quality. For example, they sometimes delegated the decision to the protege even when the protege lacked sufficient information to make a quality decision.

Managers with Mentors: How they deal with non-proteges.

Aspects of the situation that account for when participation varies. With non-proteges, these managers vary their decision making more depending on the decision quality : they delegate important problems less often to non-proteges.

Rule violations. Problems are not delegated to non-proteges who lack sufficient information. When dealing with non-proteges, these managers err more on problems of subordinates' acceptance. For example, they sometimes refused to allow non-proteges to participate in decision making even when the quality of the decision was organizationally unimportant but subordinate acceptance of the decision was necessary for successful implementation. They were reluctant to allow non-proteges to participate even when not risky.

These results suggest that managers who have had mentors are more willing to risk turning over decisions to proteges. Overall, managers with mentors tend to be especially sensitive to situational and contextual differences when dealing with proteges. Perhaps having participated in a mentoring relationship allows these managers to recognize situational differences and the potential effect of participation.

On the negative side, these managers are clearly using participation in differing ways with proteges and non proteges. But it is not clear what they are accomplishing since they did not make better decisions with their proteges, and they did not take better decisions than managers without mentors. In addition, they make be handicapping non-proteges by restricting their access to tough problems and by not taking their acceptance needs into account.

Respondents with mentoring relationships reported significantly greater perceived competency and satisfaction on all items designed to measure these relationships ($X=7.72$) than respondents without mentoring relationships ($X=6.57$, $t(167)=4.19$, $p<.001$). Participants in a mentoring relationship gain something from the relationship that translates into greater perceived competency and satisfaction. Their scores on the Vroom-Yetton problem set, however, were no higher than managers without mentors. Their greater perceived competency may not reflect actual greater competency.

Respondents with mentors reported no negative influences from their mentoring relationships on either career or personal development. This contrasts with Levinson's observation that mentorships often end bitterly.

Managers without Mentors

Managers who have not had a mentoring relationship showed little difference between protege and non-protege conditions. Overall, mangers without mentors did

not display as much sensitivity to the different situational and contextual attributes in protege versus non-protege situations as did managers with mentors.

Aspects of the situation that account for when participation varied. These managers varied their decision making style the most depending on the importance of the decision. This was true for proteges or non-proteges.

Rule violations. Managers without mentors made similar errors with proteges and non-proteges.

Practical Points to Make the Most of Mentoring

- o When you participate matters; not that you participate. .
- o Don't develop proteges at the expense of other subordinates. If proteges are chosen by the old boy system, minorities' and women's careers could be seriously jeopardized.
- o Don't be fooled by the warm glow you get from mentoring. People who've been mentored may be overly confident about their skills. While developing proteges' self-confidence is important, accuracy in self-assessment is also important.
- o Don't overprotect proteges.
- o Don't throw a protege into a situation where he or she lacks information or skills.
- o Be sensitive to non-proteges. .
- o Don't take your protege for granted.

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